

Procolt 2

September 2120

After leaving Glencet's ship, Jeffery flew the shuttle to the Star Rover and docked inside the shuttle bay. He closed the outside door and when the pressure was equalized, he left the shuttle and walked inside.

Debbie was patiently waiting for him. She hugged him while saying, "You're a great negotiator. An hour ago, they wanted to kill us and now they've invited us to stay and explore."

"I'll accept the credit, but I think it's the only logical decision they could make. I knew they would want what we had to sell."

The couple walked to the bridge. When they arrived, Jeffery told Mike to plot a course to Procolt 2 and put the Star Rover in orbit above the equator. Two hours later, the Star Rover was exactly where it was supposed to be. Then he asked Debbie to look for a landing site.

On the second orbital pass, she said, "I think I found the perfect site. It looks like a large meadow near a lake. Scans indicate there are forested low mountains nearby containing a network of caves. It should be a great place to explore."

"Okay, that sounds good to me. Navigational control, put us in a geosynchronous orbit above the landing site," Jeffery ordered.

Mike responded, "Aye sir. I'll put us in a fixed position fifteen hundred miles above the landing site."

Mike programmed the navigation computer and twenty minutes later, they were in orbit above the landing site Debbie had identified.

“Captain Whitestone, take Dr. Weber, Lt. Parker, Lt. Mason, and two security officers down to the surface. Have Dr. Weber verify conditions are acceptable for us without using spacesuits. I know Garlut told me there were no dangerous animals or plants, but I want Lt. Parker to check out the plants in the area for anything that might be dangerous and Lt. Mason to look for any animals that might be a problem. I don’t want to report that one of our guests was eaten by the local fauna or flora.”

“Yes, Admiral. We should be ready to depart in fifteen minutes.”

“Debbie, don’t leave the shuttle. I want you to stay aboard in case there’s an emergency.”

She nodded. “Understood.”

Twenty minutes later, the shuttle departed the Star Rover. The trip to the surface of Procolt 2 took less than thirty minutes. Dean watched their descent on the scanner until the shuttle entered the atmosphere and was covered by a layer of clouds. He continued to watch using the long-range scanner which clearly showed the shuttle and its position relative to the landing site. As Dean watched, the shuttle approached, circled the area twice, and landed.

The ship’s com unit was monitoring Debbie. They heard her say, *“We landed. The temperature is twenty-three degrees Centigrade and there’s a westerly wind blowing at four miles per hour. Our instruments show the atmosphere is almost identical to Earth’s. Dr. Weber is running some tests that will take ten minutes, and if everything checks out, my passengers will begin their assigned tasks. I’ve instructed, for the moment, they must stay in visual range of the shuttle. One of the security people will remain on the ship with me and the other one will go with Dr. Weber.”*

“Good. Keep me informed,” Jeffery responded.

Fifteen minutes later, Jeffery received a report from Dr. Weber. *“Admiral, all the tests I’ve run for potential pathogens are negative. The only problem I found was*

excessive amounts of pollen. Since I'm not familiar with the plants here, I don't know if that will be a problem. I suggest anybody with allergies stop by the medical office for a non-drowsy antihistamine injection before going to the planet's surface. I've tested the water in the lake for dissolved minerals and for the presence of other heavy metals known to be troublesome for us, the results were similar to lakes on Earth, but I would not suggest swimming in it or drinking the water until I can check for any microorganisms that might be present."

"That's good news, Doctor. You and the captain should return to the ship so you can continue your testing. Captain Whitestone can bring the temporary housing unit and the maintenance crew down to the surface for set up."

"We can leave in a few minutes."

Jeffery called Chief Engineer Ron Rice and said, "Lt. Rice, have two of your staff bring the portable habitat to the shuttle bay. Captain Whitestone will take them to the landing site where they can assemble it."

"My guys will be there within half an hour, sir. Is that okay?"

"Yes, they can take an hour because she's still on the planet. She'll be leaving shortly."

"Great, an hour it is. Rice out"

The habitat was made up of very light, but strong, plastic panels. When fully assembled it had four bedrooms, two bathrooms, a small kitchen, a dining area, and a central-living area. It took four or five hours to assemble. It was waterproof and could withstand winds up to one hundred twenty miles per hour. Automatic climate control would maintain a constant temperature of twenty-one degrees Celsius as long as the outside temperature was between negative thirty-two and positive fifty-seven. All the furniture and the plumbing fixtures were part of the structure, but the cushions and mattresses had to be inflated.

The building had a five-hundred-gallon water supply, but for this mission they would use water from the lake. Dr. Weber was still testing the water. In the event his tests determined the water to be unusable, a filtration system would be installed to resolve the problem.

Debbie left to go back to the surface a few minutes after she arrived. She took the maintenance crew and the habitat to the surface and immediately returned to the ship.

By the time she returned, Dr. Weber had already given his approval of the water for swimming but cautioned against swallowing any. During their initial study of the animals and plants, Thomas and Shelia reported they had found nothing they would consider dangerous.

Jeffery announced that in thirty minutes the shuttle would depart for the planet's surface again. They would take fifteen of the guests aboard to the surface on this trip. They should decide among themselves who would go on the first trip. The remainder would go four hours later. There was eight hours of daylight left and he didn't want any of the guests on the surface of the planet the first night. Only crewmembers were to stay on the planet's surface.

Four people stayed in the habitat the first night on Proclot 2. There was one person from the security staff, Sheila, Thomas, and Daryl. There were no problems except a few howling animals. The next morning just after dawn, it started to rain very hard, at a rate of three inches per hour, but after a half hour the rain abruptly stopped, the clouds dissipated, and the day became sunny and warm once more.

After the rain stopped, the Star Rover sent the shuttle down to the surface on the first of two trips. The first trip had fifteen of the guests, Dr. Weber, and Jeffery. The second trip would have the remaining guests and Beatrice Woods, the mission videographer.

Each scientific crewmember had been given assignments while on the surface. Thomas Mason, the exobiologist, and Beatrice were assigned to find the indigenous animals and

take imagery of them. Sheila Nelson, a second exobiologist, was assigned to inspect the plants in the area and note if any them were harmful. She would take samples to bring back to the ship for analysis. Ensign Daryl Cohen, a geologist, volunteered to take a few of the guests with him as he explored some of the caves in the area.

Jeffery relaxed by the lake where he was joined by Dr. Weber. The water was crystal clear and there was an obvious abundance of fish swimming under the glassy surface. "You know what, Frank?" he said. "I think this would be a great spot for a vacation home. Debbie and I could live in the habitat, build a small boat, and go fishing every day."

"This seems like the perfect spot for that, Jeffery. It makes me wonder why this planet is uninhabited. Perhaps people from other planets don't like to relax the way we do?"

"I suppose that's possible. But I'd be happy to trade several cases of chocolate for the rights to this place."

"You're talking like you're ready to retire."

"No, I don't want to retire. I just want a place to go where nobody can disturb me."

Before Dr. Weber could respond, Jeffery got a call on his com unit. After he answered, Daryl said, "*Sir, I need you and Dr. Weber here immediately! We found something you have to see.*"

"What is it?" Jeffery asked.

"A body . . . well, more of a skeleton. I think it's human."

"Dr. Weber is with me. We'll be there as soon as possible. Leave your com unit open so we can find you."

"Yes sir. Cohen out."

Jeffery turned toward Frank and asked, "Did you hear that?"

"Yes, I did. But I don't think it's human. I'm certain we're the first humans to visit this planet."

"I guess we'll know shortly."

Jeffery and Dr. Weber followed the signal from Daryl's com unit to the entrance of a cave. A woman Jeffery

recognized as one of the ship's guests was waiting for them. As they approached, she said, "Doctor. Admiral. We have to go two hundred feet into the cave."

She was holding a bright, lantern-shaped light. Jeffery and Dr. Weber followed her into the cave. A few minutes later, they reached the spot where Daryl and the others were standing. They moved away from the skeleton so the doctor and Jeffery could inspect the remains.

They saw a skeleton that had shreds of clothing around it. Around its neck was a metal tag on a chain. Jeffery took one look at the metal tag and gasped. "It's definitely human. Frank, he's wearing an old military dog tag!"

Frank bent down closer to the remains and looked at the dog tag. The information on the tag was written in English. The name on the tag was Gordon Brown, he had O negative blood, and he was Catholic. It also had a social security number, so he was from the United States.

"How could Mr. Brown possibly have gotten here?" Dr. Weber asked excitedly.

Jeffery had a perplexed look on his face. He thought about the situation for a few seconds and replied angrily, "I have no idea, but I do know who to ask. The next time I see Garland it will be my first question. How long has he been here, any clue, Doctor?"

Dr. Weber knelt down and began a cursory examination of the remains. A few minutes later, when he was finished, he stood up and said, "That's a very difficult question to answer. We really don't know very much about the environment here. It does appear small animals were eating the body because there are obvious gnaw marks on the bones. But the lack of decay in the bones would seem to indicate he hasn't been dead very long. Perhaps less than a year to two, but I'm not sure. Do you think we could find out more about him since we have his name and identification numbers?"

“We could if we were back on Earth. However, after the North American Union was formed the Social Security system was replaced with the Resident Identification System, and the RIS numbers are not in the same format. Mr. Brown had to have arrived on this planet at the minimum of 100 years ago. The military stopped using Social Security Numbers back in the early twenty-first century and went to a different numbering system approved by the old Department of Defense. Can you get any information by analyzing the remains?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t have the equipment to do carbon dating, but I can do a genetic analysis. It may show any diseases he’d been exposed to during his lifetime which could give us an approximate age.”

Then Daryl said, “There’s something else over here you need to see, Admiral. Doctor.”

Jeffery and the doctor walked to where he was. There was evidence of a fire; there was a knife with a blade - six inches long, a metal water canteen, and small bones were scattered around the area.

Jeffery thought the knife was the type members of the military were given a long time ago and the metal canteen was something he had only seen in museums. Jeffery began to think perhaps Mr. Brown was much older than they thought.

Jeffery made arrangements for the skeleton to be taken back to the ship. Dr. Weber would accompany it and begin his analysis immediately. Jeffery also began to wonder if there were any other humans on the planet, so he contacted Debbie and asked her to scan for any animal larger than fifty pounds. Garlut had told him the largest animals on the planet were the size of small dogs. However, Garlut had also told him there was a substantial insect population on the planet and he had seen only a few. Now he had more questions for Garlut.

Daryl asked, "Sir. May we continue to explore the cave?"

"Yes, but inform me immediately if you find anything unusual."

"Yes, sir."

During that first full day on Procolt 2, there were a few other surprises. During the search for indigenous animals, Thomas and Beatrice discovered most of the animals they saw would be considered rodents on Earth. Perhaps the most unusual was an animal that looked like a giant squirrel. They had the same basic body shape and a long furry tail, but when they sat on their hind legs, they were thirty inches tall and looked like they weighed at least twenty-five pounds. Additionally, instead of claws they had small hands with four fingers and opposable thumbs.

The team was also surprised by the fact there were very few birds. Most of the things that flew were medium-sized insects similar to grasshoppers and some smaller ones that looked like flies. They didn't see any primates, but they were only looking in a small area. However, they still managed to gain images and video of over forty different animal species.

Sheila's search for plants yielded better results. She found eighty-one different plant species in the first few hours of her search. None of them were unusual and they looked similar to Earth's plants. She planned to widen her search area the following day.

Daryl continued the search through the cave and found no other indications of human habitation. All of the rocks in the cave walls were common on Earth.

Dr. Weber spent hours running tests on the skeletal remains of Gordon Brown but found nothing that could help him determine age.

After spending several more hours relaxing by the lake, Jeffery decided he had to return to the ship. The next shuttle was scheduled to be back to the Star Rover in twenty

minutes. He walked to the shuttle and took a seat inside. A few minutes later, Thomas and Beatrice came aboard.

Beatrice sat next to Jeffery and offered to show him the videos she had taken of the animals.

They spent the next twenty minutes looking at videos of the animals. When the video of the giant squirrel played, Jeffery stared at it and then asked Beatrice to play it again. As he watched the video the second time he said to Thomas, "This animal appears to me to be very intelligent. Perhaps I'm wrong, but it almost looks like it's posing for the camera."

"I'm glad you said that because I thought the same thing. Tomorrow I'm going to follow one around for a while to see how it spends the day. If it really is intelligent, we should know by the end of the day."

"That's a good idea. Let me know what you find out."

"Yes sir, I will do that."

After the shuttle landed on the Star Rover, Jeffery immediately went to the bridge. Ensign Anne Perkins, communications officer, was seated at the communications console and Jeffery said, "I believe the trade group communication system Garlut installed is going to be more useful than I thought. Ensign, please contact Glencet."

Anne called Glencet's ship and a few moments later they heard him say, "*Admiral Whitestone, how can I help you?*"

Jeffery took Anne's place at the console, pressed a button and said, "I have a question. While exploring a cave this morning my crew members found some humanoid remains, a skeleton and a few shreds of clothing. However, around the neck of the skeleton was a metal tag that identified him as a member of the military of the United States. That country hasn't existed on Earth for almost eighty standard years. Do you have any idea how somebody from Earth could have gotten to Procolt 2?"

"We have not spent much time on Procolt 2. We only go there to replenish our water supply. Also, we have only been

here on a permanent basis for less than two standard years. Ships from Coplent have traveled there far more often than we have, although we have not seen any ships other than cargo ships from Torblit and your ship since we have been here. I do remember hearing a rumor that some humanoids were seen on Procolt 2 many years ago, but I always thought it was just that; a rumor. Perhaps your friend Garlut can help you when you see him.”

“I’ll certainly ask him. Are you making progress with the samples I left you?”

“The box of chocolate is gone. Every member of my crew enjoyed it. I was hoping you could bring more before you leave. I gave the spice to my cook, who will use it in a cake. The power modules do seem to work as you described, but their electrical output is not suitable for our needs. When you come back with your engineer, we will explain to him what our requirements are. We would like you to tell us how much they would cost.”

“I’m certain the power modules can be designed to provide any type of electrical power that’s required. The trade group was going to send some people to Earth to help us price the products we’re going to sell. I’m sure that will be done before I return to Earth. I’ll let them know what you need and we’ll give Torblit a price. However, I won’t be back on Earth for almost two years.”

“That is not a problem. We all understand trading with new trade group planets is slow at the beginning. Since Coplent is helping you, please inform them of our desire to purchase the power modules and the chocolate. I wish I could have been more helpful regarding the human you found.”

“Don’t worry about the skeleton. I have a feeling Garlut knows something about it. When we meet again, I’ll bring you another case of chocolate.”

Glencet said, *“Thank you,”* and the connection was terminated.

Since there were no problems the first night, Jeffery agreed to let some of the guests stay in the habitat on Procolt 2 for the second night. The following morning it rained again, and Jeffery began to wonder if it was going to happen every day.

Once the rain stopped, Thomas and Beatrice went to search for another giant squirrel. Thomas thought perhaps he could make friends with the squirrel, so he took two carrots from kitchen storage before they left the habitat.

Daryl and her group of guests went to explore a different cave and Sheila went looking for more plants. This time one of the ship's guests went with her.

It took Thomas and Beatrice nearly fifteen minutes to find a squirrel. It was standing in a clearing in front of a forested area, its light brown fur shimmering in the sunlight. They were approximately one hundred and fifty feet away and decided to stay out of sight by hiding behind a large tree. The squirrel was sitting on its hind legs looking around. Beatrice began making a video recording, and as they watched, the squirrel was joined by two more. One of them was much smaller and probably a juvenile. They were shocked when they saw what happened next. The squirrels began making sounds that almost sounded like speech. As they continued to watch it became obvious it was a rudimentary form of communication. They were speaking to one another! Then, much to their surprise, the first squirrel pointed at where Thomas and Beatrice were hiding and said something to the other two squirrels. Then all three squirrels scampered back into the forest and disappeared.

Thomas could hardly believe what he had just witnessed. He stammered when he asked, "Did we really just watch three squirrels . . . have a family meeting and talk about us?"

Beatrice replied softly, "It's hard to believe, but that's what it looked like to me too."

"Did you record what they said?"

"I'll play it back and check the audio."

Beatrice played the video. The squirrel speech was loud and clear. They couldn't understand any of it, but Beatrice suggested they ask Cathy to analyze the patterns.

"I think we should keep looking for more squirrels," Thomas said.

"Absolutely."

They decided to go into the forest to continue their search. A half hour later, they spotted two of the animals sitting on a log. Beatrice started recording the two squirrels and Thomas began walking slowly toward them. The squirrels saw him coming and began talking to each other, but they made no move to run away. Thomas took the two carrots out of his pocket, and as he walked closer, he offered them to the squirrels. The squirrels looked at Thomas, exchanged a few words, and waited for him to come closer. When he was only a few feet away, he crouched down and offered each of the squirrels the food. The squirrels both reached out toward Thomas and they each took a carrot. They smelled them and took a small bite. They obviously liked the carrots because they were both eaten within a few seconds.

When the squirrels were finished, they both looked at Thomas and said something. Although he couldn't understand the words, he was sure they were asking for more. He said, "I'm sorry but I don't have any more now. I'll bring you more tomorrow."

He turned around and started walking toward Beatrice and he heard the squirrels say something to each other, then they jumped off the log and began following him. When he was a few feet from Beatrice he said, "I wonder if they're going to follow us back to the habitat."

"Well, you did want a chance to study them to see if they're intelligent. But I'm sure we already know the answer to that question."

"I'm going to call Cathy and ask her to come down here." He picked up his com unit and after exchanging greetings,

he said, “I think we need your language skills down here. Can you come down on the next shuttle?”

“Sure, but I thought there was no intelligent life on the planet. Why would you need language skills?”

“You probably won’t believe this until you see it for yourself. We discovered some animals that resemble large squirrels with small hands instead of front paws. Beatrice made several videos of them speaking to each other! I’m hoping, perhaps with your assistance, we could learn a few words of their language.”

Cathy giggled into her com unit. *“Is this a joke?”*

“No, right now two of them are following us as we walk back to the habitat. I gave them each a carrot and I think they want more. If you want, I’ll ask Beatrice to send a video to you.”

“Please do that. I’ll get back to you after I see it.”

“Okay. I’ll be waiting. Thomas out.”

Although Beatrice only heard half of the conversation, she realized Thomas wanted her to send one of the videos to Cathy, so she sent it immediately. A few minutes later, Thomas received a call from Cathy.

“This is very hard to believe,” she admitted, “but I’m sure you’re right. I heard several sounds repeated. They could be common words, names, or even phrases. I obviously don’t know what they were saying but there were definitely words being spoken. I have to talk to Admiral Whitestone about this. I’ll be down there as soon as I can.”

“Okay, we’ll be waiting at the habitat.”



Jeffery and Cathy came down to the planet on the shuttle. When they walked over to the habitat, they saw several of the crew members, including Thomas and Beatrice and few

of the guests, standing in a circle. As they drew closer, they could see two squirrels inside the circle.

As they approached, they were greeted by everyone and then two of the crew members moved out of the way, so Jeffery and Cathy could get a close look at these remarkable squirrels.

Thomas gave a carrot to Jeffery and Cathy. Cathy took the carrot, offered it to one of the squirrels, and asked, "Would you like a carrot?"

The squirrel looked at her and said something. Then Cathy asked Beatrice, "Have you been recording them?"

"Yes, by now I have nearly two hours of video."

"I want to study the recordings." Turning to Jeffery she asked, "Admiral, can you get a supply of vegetables for me that I may give to them? I'd like to be alone with them and see if I can get some basic understanding of their language."

"Yes, I'm sure I can get you all the vegetables you need. I think we have plenty of nuts aboard too. Are you sure they're actually talking?"

"It certainly appears that way, sir. One of the classes I took in college was about how some of the early explorers in Africa and South America learned native languages. I'm sure the same principals apply here."

"Okay, I'll get you some treats for our new friends. After you learn to speak their language, ask them if they know how Mr. Brown came to be on this planet."

"I know you're joking, but I suspect their language may not have words to ask the question you want. Most simple languages only have words for things that are common in their environment. They may have no real concept of time and probably would not have the ability to understand a question like, 'where did something come from?' However, they may be much smarter than we think they are. I should know in a few days."

"Okay, I want you to stay down here and work with them."

“That’s exactly what I want to do. Thank you, sir.”

Cathy spent the rest of the day working with the squirrels. She showed them common objects and said the English word and noted the response. After working with them for six hours, Cathy thought that she may have discovered the words for tree, rock, water, sun, and food. In an attempt to teach them her name she was now convinced that in the mind of the squirrels all humans were “Cathy.” It only took them five minutes to learn her name and that was impressive. Cathy also learned their word for squirrel. It was “clorspo.”

As evening approached, it was apparent the squirrels were getting uncomfortable. They turned to each other and exchanged a few words. Then one of them turned toward Cathy and said something that included the word “clorspo” and they left. In a few moments they had disappeared inside the forest. Cathy didn’t know what they said, but she thought it was probably something like, “We have to go now, but we’ll be back tomorrow.” At least she was hoping that was what they said.

Cathy went inside the habitat and went to the kitchen to find something to eat. She sat at a table and sent a report on the day’s progress to Jeffery. She was very happy with the results so far. The squirrels were sentient, but she was worried they wouldn’t return.

After she was finished eating, Beatrice walked into the kitchen, got something to drink and walked over to join Cathy.

“I was watching you work with the squirrels for a while,” Beatrice said. “I was impressed with your ability and the intelligence of the squirrels.”

“I think they call themselves ‘clorspo.’”

“Okay, I was impressed with the intelligence of the clorspo.”

Cathy laughed. “I was too. I just hope they’ll come back tomorrow morning. They left in a hurry.”

“I’m sure they’ll be back. They like our food. There’s an extra bed in my room. Do you want to use it?”

“Yes, thank you. Please show me.”

Cathy put her dishes in the dishwasher and threw away the garbage. Then she followed Beatrice to the room.

Cathy fell asleep quickly, but woke up well before dawn. She tried to go back to sleep, but after fifteen minutes she gave up. She showered, dressed, and went to the kitchen to get something for breakfast. By the time she was finished the sun was starting to rise.

She walked outside and realized it was about to rain again. She went back inside and a few minutes later the rain started. As she watched the rain, she wondered what the squirrel word for rain was. After the rain was over, she went outside looking for the squirrels, but saw none. Somebody had brought a few plastic chairs down from the ship and she decided to sit down and wait for them outside.

She didn’t have long to wait. About ten minutes later, six squirrels walked out of the forest and came over to her. She set up a camera to record everything.

She watched as the squirrels came closer and then one of them said a few words to her. She understood two of the words: “clorspo” and “spol.” She believed “spol” was the word for food. She realized she had forgotten to bring out some of the vegetables and nuts Jeffery sent. As she started to get them, she saw Sheila walking out of the habitat with the food.

Sheila gave Cathy the box and said, “I thought you might want this. Is it okay if I watch for a while? I promise I won’t interfere.”

“Sure, if you want to. Just get another chair.”

“Okay.”

Cathy opened the box and found a bag of raw almonds inside. She opened the bag of almonds and took out a handful. She gave an almond to each of the squirrels who

took and ate it, but two of the squirrels said “plor” to her as they took the nut.

Sheila asked, “Did they just say ‘thank you?’”

Cathy nodded. “I think so.”

After three hours, many carrots, and half a bag of almonds had been consumed, one of the squirrels walked up to Cathy and said something that included the words “spol,” “plor,” and “clorspo.” The squirrels then went back into the forest.

Cathy and Sheila walked back inside the habitat. Cathy sat down at a desk in the living room and said, “I think I may have enough information now to understand at least fifty words, perhaps more. This is the most exciting thing I’ve ever done!”

“Can you load their language information into one of the portable translators Garlut gave us?” Sheila asked.

“Yes, the man Garlut sent to install the communications system showed me how to do it. The problem is I know a lot of nouns, but no verbs so far. I’m hoping to add a few verbs to my vocabulary by the end of the day.”

Cathy and Sheila spent the next two weeks working with the squirrels. By the end of that time, Cathy was fluent in their language. Perhaps more surprising was that the squirrels had learned some English. Cathy asked the squirrels about Gordon Brown, but all they could tell her was that the squirrels had been seeing humans for a long time. They really didn’t have any meaningful way of measuring time, or any words to describe time, because it wasn’t important to them.

There were no more unusual discoveries made during their stay on Procolt 2. Two days before they were scheduled to leave, Cathy called Jeffery to ask if she could meet with him for a few minutes. Jeffery asked her to come to his cabin at 7:00 that evening.

At exactly 7:00, Cathy pressed the entry button on Jeffery’s cabin door. The door opened and she went inside.

Jeffery was seated at the table. He looked at her and said, "Please, have a seat, Cathy. How can I help you?"

"Sir, I know we're scheduled to leave in two days. I've made great progress in

communications with the squirrels and I would like to know if I can stay here for a while so I can continue working with them. They're amazing creatures and are probably more fluent in English than I am in Squirrel. They have a society which has values similar to our own. I really think they warrant further study."

"I agree we should study them, but do you realize it will be years before we'll be able to come back? Are you ready to spend the next three years without human company?"

"Sheila wants to stay here too, so I won't be alone. There's plenty of food and water and the habitat will provide shelter. I'm sure we'll be fine."

"I'll have to think about it. Is Anne capable of taking your place?"

"Yes, I'm sure she is."

"I also have to ask Glencet if you can stay here, since he claims his planet owns all of the planets in this system. I'll give you my answer tomorrow."

"Thank you, sir."

After Cathy left his cabin, Jeffery walked over to the bridge. When he arrived, Mike and Anne were on duty. He said to Anne, "Cathy wants to stay here and work with the squirrels. Before I can make a decision on her request, I need to know if you believe you're capable of taking over her position. Are you okay with that, Ensign?"

Anne thought for a minute and said, "Yes sir, Cathy and I loaded the information on the squirrels' language into the translator together. I've read the manuals and both of us studied the information Garlut left for us on the trade group protocols."

“Okay, now I have to ask Glencet if I can leave two of my people on the planet for three years. Please contact him for me.”

“Yes sir.”

A minute later, Anne handed Jeffery the headset and he said, “Captain Glencet, may I ask you a question?”

“Yes, of course. Admiral Whitestone.”

“While exploring Procolt 2, we discovered something else besides the skeleton of a human. We discovered a race of very intelligent animals. They’re similar to an animal on Earth we call a squirrel. Except these animals are not only intelligent, they are much larger, and have hands instead of paws. They have their own language, which one of my officers has learned. This officer and one of our ship’s exobiologists have asked permission to stay on Procolt 2 to study these animals. However, you only allowed us twenty days to explore the planet. Before I give them my answer I have to know if you would have any objections if they stayed here.”

“I am not sure. Are they capable of living on their own for that long?”

“Yes, I’m sure they are. We constructed a small building on the planet which will provide them with shelter and there’s plenty of food and water.”

“Do you want me to agree or would it be easier for you if I refused your request?”

“This isn’t an easy decision. I’m concerned for their safety, but I understand their desire to stay here. Obviously if you refuse my request the decision is no longer mine, but I’m not looking for an easy way out.”

“I have a suggestion. In exchange for three boxes of chocolate we will allow your people to stay on the planet. Additionally, we will make monthly trips to Procolt 2 and make sure they are okay. Do they have the equipment to contact us in the event of an emergency?”

“No, we only have one trade group communication system and it’s installed on my ship.”

“We have some handheld devices. I could give them one to use, but it does not have a translator-built in.”

“Do you have a handheld communications system that can send and receive signals from Procolt 2 to Procolt 4? Our handheld devices have a maximum range of only five thousand miles. Anyway, one of the officers who wants to stay on the planet is our language expert. I could bring her to your ship and I’m sure she would be able to learn enough of your language for basic communication in a few days.”

“Okay, we can do that. Have you made the decision to let her stay?”

“No, but I will soon. I will contact you again soon.”

“Okay.”

Debbie was on the planet, so Jeffery called her and asked her to take the next shuttle back to the ship. When she was aboard, she went to her cabin where Jeffery was waiting for her. “Is there a problem?” she asked.

“No, not exactly. I have a decision to make and I want your input.”

“Does this concern Cathy’s request to stay on the planet?”

“Yes, it’s not an easy decision. Three years is a long time to be on your own.”

“They aren’t alone. Don’t forget the squirrels are there. I’ve been watching them. I’m certain they wouldn’t allow any harm to come to either.”

“I’ve made an arrangement with Glencet to check on them once a month. Glencet is also going to give them a handheld communicator so they could contact his ship in case of an emergency. So, do you think I should approve their request to stay here?”

“Yes, I think you should.”

“Okay, but I want to make sure they understand what they’re getting into.” Jeffery picked up his com unit and

called Cathy. “Hi Cathy. I’d like to see you and Sheila in my cabin at 0900 tomorrow morning.”

“Does this mean you’re approving our request?”

“No, it means I want to talk to both of you about your request.”

“Yes sir, we’ll both be there.”



The following morning at 8:57, the entry button was pushed on the door to Jeffery and Debbie’s cabin. Jeffery said, “Come in.”

Cathy and Sheila walked into the cabin.

Jeffery and Debbie were seated at the small table in their room. They motioned for Cathy and Sheila to sit.

Jeffery said, “Good morning. As I explained yesterday, I want to be sure you understand what you’re asking. My decision will depend on what you say. Is that clear?”

Both women said, “Yes, sir.”

“When we leave here, we’ll probably be unable to return for three years. Remember, this is the only interstellar ship we have. Should something happen to the ship you would be stranded here for who knows how long.”

“I hadn’t thought about that but I believe the odds are fairly remote anything would happen. In any case, I’m willing to accept the risk,” Cathy said.

“I’m also willing to accept the risk,” Sheila said.

“In the event I approve this you should know I have made arrangements with Glencet to send a ship to check on you once every month. Also, Glencet is going to supply you with a com unit you can use to contact his ship in case of an emergency. However, the com unit doesn’t have a translator built in. Both of you will be required to go to Glencet’s ship and spend enough time there to learn their language. You

don't have to be fluent, but you will need to know enough to call for help and understand the response.”

“That seems like a very good idea. Is Glencet's ship going to stay here for the next three years?” Cathy asked.

“I don't know, but I already thought about asking him.”

“Sheila, how are you with learning languages?”

“I am sure I'm not as good as Cathy, but I took several years of French in college and didn't find it very difficult.”

“Good, so you're comfortable with this?”

“Yes sir.”

“Very good. I'll contact Glencet today and we'll take you to his ship tomorrow. Please make sure your furry friends know you won't be there for a few days.”

“I already told them we might be leaving and would be gone for many days. They have no concept of numbers, but if I'm given the opportunity, I'm going to try to teach them about numbers and time.”

“Okay, I'll contact you after I speak to Glencet.”

The two women left the cabin and after the door closed Debbie said, “I think Sheila is worried about learning Torblit, or whatever they call their language.”

“I got the same feeling. We'll see how she does. She only has to be able to call for help.”

“Yes, I know.”

Later that morning, Jeffery contacted Glencet and asked him if he could bring his two crew members over there at 10:00 the next morning. Glencet agreed and reminded Jeffery about the chocolate. Laughing, Jeffery replied he would bring the three cases.



At 9:00 the following morning, the Star Rover left the orbit of Procolt 2 and was within ten miles of Glencet's ship by

9:30. Anne contacted Glencet's ship informing them their shuttle would depart shortly. As the shuttle approached the alien craft the door opened to the hangar bay where the shuttle flew inside and landed. When the bay was pressurized there was a knock at the hatch of the shuttle. As soon as it opened Jeffery saw Glencet and next to him was a man probably six inches taller than Glencet, and significantly stronger looking.

Jeffery put on his translator and heard Glencet tell the man to take the cases of chocolate to his cabin. He said, "Good morning, Captain Glencet. It's nice to see you again. Permission to come aboard?"

Glencet replied, "Please, welcome aboard, Admiral." He watched as the three exited the shuttle and asked, "Are these the crew members who want to stay on Procolt 2?"

"Yes, they are." Pointing at Cathy, he said, "This is Lieutenant Cathy Carter, she's a language expert and our chief communications officer." Then he pointed to Sheila and said, "This is Lieutenant Sheila Roth, she's one of our ship's exobiologists, specializing in botany."

"It is very nice to meet both of you. Please accompany me to the bridge and I will introduce you to your instructor. Her name is Moltas."

They followed Glencet to the bridge and Glencet introduced Moltas. The three women left the bridge. After they left Jeffery said, "I'm sure Lieutenant Carter won't have any problems, but I'm not so sure about Lieutenant Roth. If she's unable to learn what she needs to know to make a distress call I'll have to withdraw my permission for them to stay on Procolt 2."

"I will contact you tomorrow and let you know how they're doing. Do they both have translators?" Glencet asked.

"No, we only have two. I gave one to Lieutenant Carter."

"Okay, we have a lot of them aboard, but they are not programmed for your language. We will borrow the one

Lieutenant Carter has and program our units. Then we can lend one to Lieutenant Roth. Do you have any videos of the animals you found?"

"Yes, I believe Lieutenant Carter brought them aboard. After your translators are loaded, you'll be able to understand my crew as well as the animals. Lieutenant Carter added the animal's language protocols earlier."

"Very good. I will take you back to your shuttle."

"Thank you. I'm looking forward to getting a progress report tomorrow morning."

The following morning, Jeffery had a brief conversation with Glencet who told him both officers were doing well learning the new language. He felt they wouldn't need more than two more days and they could be picked up in the evening the day after tomorrow.

After the conversation with Glencet, Jeffery and Debbie went down to the habitat. When they arrived, they were greeted by a group of squirrels. One of the larger ones came up to him and asked in a squeaky but understandable voice, "Are you Cathy's master?"

Cathy had told Jeffery the squirrels were learning English but he was stunned by the question. He stared at the squirrel for a few moments and said, "Cathy works for me, so I am her superior, but her master."

"Are you going to let Cathy stay here with us?"

"Yes, Cathy is going to stay with you. Sheila will stay with you too."

"Good. We like them. We will take care of them and make them happy."

"I'm happy to hear you say that. I want Cathy and Sheila to be happy while they stay here."

"Will they be here when the sun comes up again?"

"No, they'll be here after the sun comes up two times."

Jeffery saw his response to the question resulted with a blank stare from the squirrel. He had forgotten the squirrels had no concept of numbers. After thinking about it, he said,

“They will not be here when the sun comes up again. They will be here the next time the sun comes up after the sun comes up tomorrow.”

The squirrel seemed to be satisfied with his answer. It went back to the group and spoke to them for a few seconds before leaving the area around the habitat to venture back to the forest.

After the squirrels left, Debbie asked, “Do you think they understood what you said?”

“I think so. I never realized how hard it was to talk and not use numbers.” He chuckled. “To tell you the truth, I’d like to stay here too. It’s perfect. The temperature is ideal, it rains on schedule, and you can actually talk to the wildlife. What more could you ask for?”

“It does seem nice, but I think after a while I’d get tired of eating vegetables. I like meat, but I know I could never kill anything wild on this planet for food.”

“I understand, but if we set up a resort, we could bring in a supply of meat on a regular schedule. I think people from Earth would pay a lot to vacation here.”

“Are you planning on building your own starship? I don’t think NASA wants to be in the tourist transport business.”

“Actually, you would probably need several ships because with only one ship you would only be able to make two trips per year, and most people can’t just disappear for the length of time needed to come here on vacation.”

“I think they can if they’re very wealthy.”

“Well, it was just a thought. But I think we should spend the whole day here since we won’t be back for a while.”

“You convinced me.”

Jeffery and Debbie spent the day relaxing. They took the last shuttle of the day back to the Star Rover. The following day would be spent preparing the ship for the one-hundred-and-thirty-day trip to Coplent, of which, neither Jeffery nor Debbie were looking forward to.



The following morning, the Star Rover went back to Glencet's ship to pick up Cathy and Sheila. Once they were aboard, the Star Rover returned to Procolt 2. Jeffery took Cathy and Sheila to the habitat. The squirrels were waiting for them and appeared to be very pleased to see the two women again.

Jeffery asked, "Are you sure you want to stay here? This is your last chance to change your mind."

Cathy spoke first, "We're sure we want to stay, sir. I'm sure everything will be okay. Glencet told us he's scheduled to go home in a half year, but the ship taking his place will continue to keep tabs on us," she chuckled. "They won't do anything to cut off their supply of chocolate."

"Glencet told me that too. When we come back, I'll bring him a few dozen cases, and some usable power modules. We'll come back as soon as possible."

After the "goodbyes" were said Jeffery returned to the shuttle. He turned back and waved to his two brave officers, then he got aboard, closed the hatch, and returned to the Star Rover. He kept thinking he may have made a serious mistake allowing the women to stay.